

THE BENT TREE

THE call was irresistible. I had tramped for nearly two hours along the white road, when suddenly a long stretch of open heath with sparsely-scattered trees and high gorse bushes invited me to break my journey and to seek the shade of a wood that fringed it on the western side. The ground sloped upwards at a steep gradient and I was soon among the cool shadows of the larch trees. After climbing for nearly half-an-hour I found myself on a kind of plateau, looking down upon one of the most beautiful sights in the world, the Weald of Sussex trembling in a gray heat mist framed through a thin belt of trees. I pushed forward, determining to rest in this most attractive spot. Nearing the fringe of this little clump, I observed a bent tree in a clearing. As I approached it it occurred to me that the subject before me was curiously like Corot's famous masterpiece. It was indeed a wonderful and romantic spot. Beneath me a river rambled through the meadows and became lost in the gray-line distances. There was no sign of civilization except sleepy cattle and the well-kept fields, and occasionally a village nestling in the hollow of the downs. The only sound was the movement of leaves, the drone of bees and the lowing of cattle in the distant meadows.

I sat down on the bent tree, and as I looked around it occurred to me that the spot I had chosen was like a little arbor. It might have been the home of some God of ancient Britain, who could have lived here undisturbed through all the generations. I was wondering whether any one else had ever penetrated to this glorious retreat from the world when my eye caught a small square of white paper pinned on the trunk of the bent tree. I examined it, and lo! on it was written in ink: "GONE TO LUNCH, BACK IN 20 MINUTES."

Now if there is one thing that makes me wretchedly unhappy it is the action of people who find pleasure in disfiguring nature, in carving their initials on tree-trunks, in scattering paper and orange-peel about the country-side; but somehow, when I caught sight of this absurd city office formula pinned to a tree in this most inaccessible and romantic spot, I must confess that "my lungs did crow like Chanticleer." I felt that here indeed was the work of a vast and subtle humorist. The formula was so familiar. How often had I waited hours in murky passages, buoyed up by this engaging promise! It seemed so redolent of drab staircases, and files and roll-top desks, that its very mention out here struck a fantastic note. That any one should suggest that he carried on a business here, that his time was precious, that after gulping down a cup of coffee, he would rush back, cope with increasing press of affairs, seemed to me wonderfully and amazingly funny. I must acknowledge that I made myself rather ridiculous. I laughed till the tears streamed down my face, and my

only desire was for a companion with whom to share the manna of this gigantic jest. I looked at the card again. It was comparatively clean, so I presumed that the joke had been perpetrated quite recently.

And then I began to wonder whether the jester would return, whether, after all, the slip had any significance. Was it the message of a poacher to a friend? Or was this the secret meeting place of some gods of High Finance? I determined in any case to wait the allotted span, and in the meantime I stretched myself on the stem of the bent tree, and, lighting a cigarette, prepared to enjoy the tranquillity of the scene.

It was barely ten minutes before my siesta was disturbed by a man coming stealthily up the slope. He was a medium-sized, sallow-faced fellow with small tired eyes set in dark hollows. He was wearing a tail-coat and a bowler hat. He shuffled quickly through the wood, pushing the branches of the trees away from him. His eyes fixed me furtively, and as he entered the little arbor, he took off his hat and fidgeted with it, as though looking for a customary hook on which to hang it.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting?" was his greeting.

"Not at all," I found myself answering, for lack of a more suitable reply.

"Did Binders send you?" he asked tentatively.

"No," I replied, pulling myself together. "I just happened to come here."

A look of disappointment passed over his face. "Oh!" he said, walking up and down. "I some-

times do a bit with Binders and his friends, you know" — he waved his arms vaguely — "you know, from Corlesham."

Corlesham I knew to be a village rather more than two miles away, a sleepy hamlet of less than fifty souls.

"Oh, I see," I replied, more with the idea of not discouraging him than because any particular light had come to me.

He looked at me searchingly for some moments, and then, going over to a thick gorse-bush, he knelt down and grouped underneath and presently produced a thick pile of papers and circulars.

"I wonder whether you would like to do anything in these? These West Australians are good. They're right down to 65. If you can hold on, a sure thing. If you would like a couple of thousand now . . ." he was nervously biting his nails; then he said, "Could you spare me a cigarette?"

I produced my case and handed him one.

"Thanks very much," he said. "They don't like me to smoke at home," and he waved his hand towards the north. I followed the direction, and just caught sight of the top of a gable of a large red-brick building through the trees.

So this was the solution!

"This is a glorious place," I said.

This seemed a very harmless platitude and one not likely to drive a being to despair. But it had a strange effect on my individual, for he sat down on a broken branch and burst into a paroxysm of invective.

"Oh, Gawd!" he said. "I hate it, hate the sight of it! Day after day — all the same! All these blinkin' trees and fields — all the same, nothing happenin' ever."

I found it very difficult to meet this outburst. I could think of nothing to say, so I kept silent. After a time he got up, puffing feverishly at the cigarette, and walked round the little arbor. Every now and then he would stop and make a gesture towards the shrubs. I believe he was visualizing files and folios, ledgers, and typewriters. He made a movement of opening and shutting drawers.

"You've been a bit run down, haven't you?" I said at last, with a feeble attempt to bridge the gulf.

He looked at me uncertainly, and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"I was unlucky," he said sullenly. "I worked like a nigger for thirty years, but so do the others — lots of them — and they're all right: Just sheer bad luck, if you know what I mean. I can do it now when they let me. That's why I come here. Binders helps me a bit. He sends me people. And, do you know?" he whispered to me confidentially, "I've got the postman on my side. He delivers me letters here at twopence a time. Look! here is my mail-box!" He stooped down and lifted a large stone and produced a further pile of correspondence and circulars. "Would you like to buy some of these Trinidads? I could work it for you."

He looked at me anxiously, and I made some elaborate excuse for not seizing such a splendid opportunity.

He sighed, and placed the papers back under the stone.

"Have you ever dealt in big things?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not — in your sense," I answered, nurturing an instinctive sense of outraged superiority against this person who I felt despised me.

"You know what I mean by big things," he said fiercely. "Millions and millions, and the lives and works of millions of people! Do you know why I come down here to this rotten little clearing? Because it sometimes reminds me of my office off Throgmorton Street. Look! It was just this size. I had my desk over there. Horswall, my secretary, had his desk here. Here was the fireplace. The press just here by the window. Here the shelves with all the files. Can you imagine what it's like to have been there all those years, to have worked up what I did — all out of nothing, mark you! — to have got the whole rubber market in the hollow of my hand! — and then, oh, God! to be condemned to — this!" and he made a gesture of fierce contempt towards the Weald of Sussex.

"For nearly two years now," he continued, "I've been living in this hole."

"Nature has a way," I said, in my most sententious manner, "of coming back on us."

"Naycher! Naycher!" he almost screamed. "Don't talk to me about Naycher! What sort of friend is Naycher to me or you? Naycher gives you inclinations, and then breaks you for following them! Two men fall into a pond — what does Naycher care that one man was trying to drown his enemy while

the other was trying to save a dog? They both stand their chance of death. Naycher leads you up blind alleys and into marshes and lets you rot. Besides, isn't man Naycher? Isn't it Naycher for me to work and make money, as it is for these blighting birds to sing? Aren't roll-top desks as much Naycher as — these blasted trees?"

He blinked savagely at the surrounding scene. The smoke from a distant hamlet drifted sleepily heavenwards, like incense to the gods of the Downs.

"My father was a turner in Walham Green, and he apprenticed me to the joinery, but I had my ambitions even in those times." He nodded knowingly, and mopped his brow. "At eighteen I was a clerk in a wholesale house in St. Paul's Churchyard. For three years I worked there underground, by artificial light. Then I got made sub-manager of a wharf at the South end of Lower Thames Street. I was there for five years, and saved nearly three hundred pounds out of a salary of £120 a year. Then I met Jettison, and we started that office together, Jettison & Gateshead, Commission Agents. Work and struggle, work and struggle, year after year. But it was not till I got on to rubber that I began to make things move. That was eight years after. Do you remember the boom? I got in with Gayo, who had lived out in the Malay Straits — knew everything — we got the whole game at our fingers' ends. We knew just when to buy and just when to sell. Do you know, I've made as much as four thousand pounds in one afternoon, just talking on the

telephone! And we done it all in that little room"—he gazed jealously round the little arbor in the hills, and scowled at me. Then he produced a packet of cigarettes and lighted one from the stump of the last.

"In those days, through Gayo's friends, we followed the whole course of the raw stuff. Then Gayo went out to Malay, and he used to cable me every few days, putting me on to the right thing. My God, he was a man! It went on for two years, when suddenly a cable came to say he was dead—fever, or something, up-country. That was the end. The slump came soon after. I worked hard, but I never got control back. Down and down and down they went, as though Gayo was dragging them through the earth." His lower lip trembled as he rolled the emaciated cigarette over.

"Lord, what a fight I had, though I sat in that office there, in my shirt-sleeves, day and night for months on end, checking tapes, cabling, lying, faking, bluffing"—he chuckled with a meditative intensity. "I'd have done it then, if they'd given me time. But they closed in; there were two Scotch firms, and a man named Klaus. I knew they meant to do me down. There was a set against me. I wasn't there in the end. I was sitting in the office one night. . . ." He passed his hand over his brow and swept away a wasp that had settled there. He sat silent for some moments, as though trying to recall things, and twice started to speak without framing a sentence.

"My brother was very good to me," he said sud-

denly, waving his hand toward the red-brick gable in the trees. "He was very good to me all through." Then he added, with a sort of contemptuous shrug, "In the cabinet-making he was; got a little works at Bow — made about four hundred a year — married, and five children."

He sat for some minutes with his head in his hands, and then he sat up and gazed upon the joyous landscape with unseeing eyes.

I ventured to remark, "Well, I'm sure this place ought to do you good." He turned his melancholy eyes upon me, and sighed.

"Yes," he said, after a pause. "You're just the sort. I've seen so many of you about. Some of you have butterfly nets." He kept repeating at intervals, "Butterfly-nets!" One felt that the last word in contumely had been uttered. He sank into an apathy of indifference. Then he broke out again.

"I tell you," he uttered fiercely, "that I had millions and millions. I controlled the work and the lives of millions of men, and you come here and talk to me of Naycher. Look at these damned trees! They go green in the summer, yellow in the autumn, and bare in the winter. Year after year, exactly the same thing, and that's all there is to it. I'm sick of the sight of them. But look at men! Think of their lives, the change and variety! What they can do! Their clothes, their furniture, their houses, their cities! Think of their power! The power of making and marring!"

"You mean the power of buying and selling," I ventured.

"Yes, that's just it!" he said, feeling that he was converting me.

"The power of buying and selling! Of making men rich or poor!" He stood up and waved his thin arms and gazed wildly round him. "Not chasing butterflies!"

At that moment we both became aware that a third person was on the scene. He was a well set-up man, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. He was dressed in a dark-blue serge suit and a tweed cap. He stepped quietly through the trees, and went up to my companion, and said:

"Ah! there you are, Mr. Gateshead. I'm afraid it's almost time for your afternoon nap, sir." And then, turning to me, he nodded and remarked: "A warm afternoon, sir!" He spoke with a quiet, suave voice that somehow conveyed the feeling of the "iron hand in the velvet glove." His voice, seemed to have a sedative effect on Mr. Gateshead. My companion did not look at him, but he seemed to shrink within himself. A certain flush that had accompanied his excitement vanished, and his face looked old and set. He drew his narrow shoulders together and his figure bent. He stood abstractedly for a few moments, gazing at the trees around him, and then, with a vague gesture that was characteristic of him, he clutched the lapels of his coat, and with his head bent forward he walked away towards the building. He did not cast a glance in my

direction, and the man in the serge suit nodded to me and followed him leisurely.

I clambered down the slope of the wood, and for some reason felt happy to get once more upon the road.

About half a mile from Corlesham I met the postman coming up the hill, wheeling his bicycle. He was a sandy-haired man, splendidly Saxon, with gray-blue eyes and broad mouth. I asked him if there was a footpath to Corlesham, and he directed me.

"Do you have a long round?" I asked.

"Three or four mile, maybe," he said, looking at me narrowly.

"It's a good pull up to the Institution," I ventured.

"What institution might that be?" he said, and his mild blue eyes disarmed me with their ingenuousness.

"The house with the three red gables," I answered.

"Oh!" came the reply. "You mean old Gateshead's."

"Does he own it?" I said incredulously.

"Ay, and he could own six others for all the difference it would make to his money. He owns half the county."

"And yet what a strange idea," I murmured insinuatingly. "To own a large house and yet to have one's letters delivered in a wood!"

The postman swung his bag into a more comfortable position and looked across his machine at me with a grin.

"Those as has money can afford to have any ideas they like," he said at last.

"I'm afraid his money doesn't make him very happy," I ventured, still groping for further enlightenment.

The postman gave his right pedal a vigorous twirl as a hint of departure. He then took out a packet of Navy Cuty cigarettes and lighted one. This action seemed to stimulate his mental activities, and he leant on the handle-bars and said:

"Ay, if one has no money maybe one can make oneself happy thinking one has. And if one has money, may be one can make oneself happy by thinking one hasn't." He blinked at me, and then added, by way of solving all life's mysteries: "If one — puts too much store by these things."

I could find no remark to complement the postman's sententious conclusions, and, dismissing me with a nod, he mounted his bicycle and rode off up the hill.